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'We learn from each other': Creating a scholarly community of practice through peer tutoring

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This article shares our thoughts on how an online, distance-learning postgraduate peer-tutor training scheme provides an opportunity to integrate scholarship and development for both peer tutors and staff. This work was presented at the 19th annual SEDA conference in November 2015.

In medicine, the recent introduction of structured learning for peer tutors has been shown to enhance the quality of teaching practice (Fellmer-Drüg et al., 2014). In nursing, peer tutoring has been shown to improve academic performance amongst student nurses (Robinson and Niemer, 2010). Further research is underway to determine if the same applies in other science-based disciplines such as veterinary medicine.

We will start by describing the peer-tutor training scheme at the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies (R(D)SVS), and how this supports peer tutors to develop essential skills such as facilitation, organisation and group working. We will then move on to consider the process of mentoring student colleagues as we engage in scholarly and developmental activities. This will include a reflection on how this process can enhance the integration of scholarship in the practice of staff and students. The article concludes with a discussion of future plans to continue the work.

The authors are all part of the peer-tutor team; Sharon and Jessie are members of staff and Yvonne, Athinodoros and Sally have worked as postgraduate peer tutors.

Postgraduate peer-tutor training scheme

Online taught MSc students at the R(D)SVS volunteer as peer tutors for

courses delivered as part of a part-time distance education programme – their primary role being to facilitate study groups covering key academic skills. Taking into account research in this area (Beaumont et al., 2012), the training materials include support specifically aimed at new online teaching staff. This includes guidance in online moderating following Salmon's (2012) model, practice sessions and group discussion between peer tutors and staff on the key elements of supporting online students.

To encourage the key components of academic leadership and scholarship development, as reported in McKiggan-Fee et al. (2013) and Zaccagnini and Verenikina (2013), peer tutors are given the opportunity and support to apply for Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA) while staff apply for Senior Fellow (SFHEA).

Peer-tutor training provided a theoretical basis for the practice of peer tutoring and also created a scholarly community of practice comprising peer tutors and staff. This was fostered by regular online meetings including debrief sessions and end-of-year focus groups. The

ongoing process was enhanced by the experiences and reflections of us all while applying for fellowship. This three-phase process of community development is outlined in Figure 1.

Typical feedback from the peer tutors indicates that: 'The current format [of the training] works (for) me, especially with the staff support but also the other experienced peer tutors who have done it before that can support us.' We will continue to monitor feedback and adapt as required as this is a student/staff partnership.

Quotes from the peer tutors:

'Peer tutor training and the experience of peer tutoring has been a lot of fun, opening up new avenues of communication with my peers and with staff at the university.'

'Training and practising as a peer tutor was a lot of fun and introduced me to the richness of being part of a wider teaching and learning community. It also helped me to develop my teaching and learning skills.'

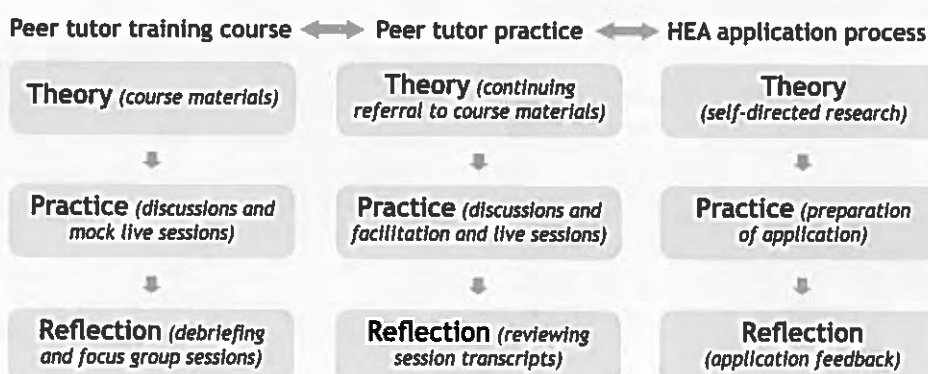


Figure 1 Process of developing a scholarly community building on peer-tutor training

Mentoring and support

As we have said, members of the peer-tutor team attended regular debrief sessions following each course, providing an opportunity to share their experiences, discuss research, and plan for upcoming courses.

Quote from the peer tutors:

'I felt that there was a lot of support and guidance, particularly within the first few months of it starting. Lots of opportunities to ask questions...'

It is important to both Jessie and Sharon that the peer tutors feel supported and can ask questions at any time. We offer various modes of communication to ensure no member of the team feels isolated; this includes email, phone, discussion board, Skype and virtual classroom. In addition, while the course teaching teams appreciate the tutoring sessions for their students, a concern was expressed at the outset that this project would become an added time burden. Mentoring our peer tutor team therefore maximises the benefit for our colleagues by assisting their students and minimising the impact on their time. This draws on skills that we have developed as personal tutors (director of studies) and in our wider student support roles at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels.

Mentoring is also a key requirement for those applying for senior fellowship, as it underpins the development of the academic from one who is developing themselves to one who can support and guide others as they develop. This role has a benefit for the mentor as well as the mentee.

Quotes from the staff:

'Working with the peer tutors helped me to build my confidence mentoring those working towards AFHEA and FHEA. The peer tutors inspired and motivated me to work on my SFHEA application and apply for my PhD, as they were also working full time and studying.'

'As a follow on from the experience of mentoring the peer tutors I have gone ahead and volunteered to be part of the University's Mentoring Scheme and this in turn informed my SFHEA application.'

Enhancing opportunities for staff and student scholarship

Fung (2014) highlighted the importance of schemes which create space for personal development, engage students as partners and help to build a community of practice which is keen to inspire and contribute to the learning landscape. The open and dialogic nature of this process has assisted in this space-creation for all participants.

Working on the HEA award enhanced awareness of our own learning processes through self-questioning and reflective practice. It also increased our ability to self-regulate our cognitive strategies for both learning and teaching.

Robinson and Niemer (2010) found evidence that some student mentors went on to develop an interest in an educational career. This was certainly the case for Sally, Yvonne and Athinodoros during their time as peer tutors. Applying for the HEA award, combined with the mentoring support received, created an opportunity to further this interest.

Reflection is a critical part of our development, especially when preparing our applications. In order to foster reflection, enough time and opportunity for development is necessary. Following the establishment of a suitable knowledge base (Hatton and Smith, 1995) consisting of our discussion with students and staff, we incorporated the knowledge gained into our applications. Sharing ideas on how to manage academic skills and listening to students' specific approaches formed an environment of mutual benefit (Evans, 2015). For example, some strategies adopted by the tutees were also used by the peer tutors who were working on their dissertation preparation, and by staff in their SFHEA applications.

Yvonne described this process as a transition from learning to 'pedagogy' – when working on our applications, we researched the theory behind the practice we had undertaken as peer tutors and staff. We have all experienced workplace learning, a very important component of veterinary clinical education. With mentoring support, workplace learning can help students to identify gaps in their knowledge and skills, allowing these to be addressed (Magnier et al., 2011). In this project, we were employing the same workplace learning, and supporting each other in integrating knowledge. Through shared understanding, we adapted and enhanced our teaching practices.

Quotes from staff:

'Discussing research with the peer tutors helped me to develop a more critical, in-depth understanding of the theory in practice. As always, teaching a subject helps you understand it better.'

'Reflection for some of the peer tutors like myself was something that we struggled with. Scientific writing is normally in the third person so the "I" does not come naturally. Helping the peer tutors helped me.'

For the peer tutors the experience and recognition of the AFHEA helps with the academic journey.

Quotes from the peer tutors:

'Receiving recognition as an AFHEA has aided me in successfully applying to continue studying at doctoral level in another institution, and I hope that my experiences as a peer tutor will help me to make the most of my teaching opportunities there.'

'While preparing my AFHEA application I realised that it is a tool that is been widely used in teaching and I was happy to be a part of it.'

'After being awarded the AFHEA'

status, I was assigned to run two practical and one theoretical course for final year vet students, while doing my internship at a Veterinary Centre. It was great to have positive feedback from my internship supervisor, especially on how well I used the ice-breakers to facilitate the participation of students.'

'Being awarded the AFHEA has given me the confidence to embark on further study and to apply for a doctorate. I am now able to capitalise on my own skills and hopefully will be able to use them in the future to enhance the learning experiences of others.'

Conclusion

We reflected both individually and as a team on whether we make effective use of the inspiration and ideas raised as a result of our discussions on teaching and learning in our discipline.

We are all mentoring peers at different levels – those with AFHEA are now mentoring undergraduate students who are working towards their Associate Fellowship, and those with Fellow or Senior Fellow are mentoring those applying for Fellow or Associate. Our community of practice is growing, and growing stronger.

Looking forward, all participants are involved in the development of our online postgraduate 'hub', a social

network where students, alumni and staff can share research and mentor each other in our ongoing development. The skills we have learned and the connections we have forged as a result of this process will be extended to a peer-tutor support network so that alumni can return to connect and support new peer tutors.

We all agree with Ross (2012) that there is little difference between teachers who study and students who teach. The process of supporting and working together in a close-knit team provided each of us with opportunities to learn, reflect and develop our own skills. By mentoring the peer tutors as junior academics, this community of practice guided and supported all our distance-learning students.

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Reflections on a conference in Kerala

Jo Peat, University of Roehampton, SEDA Co-Chair

Carrying on from Gail Hall's (*Educational Developments*, 16.4) piece, 'Confessions of a SEDA Conference Interloper', I wanted to pen a piece on a recent conference I attended.

Conference proceedings have always seemed more or less formal examples of a widely accepted format. Some UK conferences have the feel of a friendly knitting circle; others are more formal, the speaker at the rostrum the focus of the room. Still others take a more interactive approach, alternating between 'informing' their audience and 'being informed' by the same audience, creating an atmosphere of active, participative dialogue. Despite these differences,

the actual structure remains largely the same: an opening keynote, a conference dinner, seminars or workshops based on highly worked abstracts and usually a closing address.

Early in 2016 I was honoured to be invited to a conference in Kerala, run by the University of Kerala, with delegates from a multitude of other organisations from across the (huge) state. Bridget Middlemas and I were the keynote speakers and main workshop facilitators for two days. Despite not being certain of whether the conference venue would have internet access, PowerPoint facilities or whether our delegates had access to any form of IT in their daily work, our topic was